



“Not Just Junk on the Web”

“Not Just Junk on the Web”: How On-line Writing Assignments May Benefit Student Writing

Introduction

As our curriculum at all levels and in all its aspects becomes increasingly, and apparently inexorably, engaged with the internet, the need for study of the benefits and risks of those engagements to students becomes more pressing. Many of us as faculty may already be feeling at least an anecdotal anxiety about some perceived risks: an alarming proliferation of instances of on-line plagiarism; the apparent assumptions of many students that research carried out within the virtual lanes of the Internet highway is an easy substitute for work conducted inside real libraries; a general and disturbing lack of on-line accuracy about such fundamentals as factual details. Faculty in literature and composition programs are naturally and of necessity especially alert to possible changes in the processes and quality of student writing, since we hold out against various cultural impulses already in place which encourage too relaxed an approach to written communication by today's novice writers. In the particular intersection of research and writing as a context for student performance, however, and as faculty take advantage of the new technology by developing increasing numbers of assignments and courses that allow or require students to write specifically for an Internet audience, what can we learn about the character as well as the quality of that performance? Answers are just beginning to emerge. Martha Bogart, a faculty member at the University of Missouri, for example, points out that hypertext writing “demands an evaluation of sorts and challenges student writers to create a new type of academic composition that breaks out of rhetorical structures.” Although Internet composing may pose risks to sheer compositional quality, Bogart looks more closely at gains to be had from asking students to write for this newer medium of communication. These may include, she asserts, a fuller engagement with various interpretations of a given idea or work.

At the University of Minnesota, for the past four years we have been faculty sponsors for an exciting website devoted to providing beginning information about United States women writers of color. Our site, VG/ Voices from the Gaps, has amassed over 150 individual author home pages, each offering basic biographical information, critical assessment of some of each author's writing, bibliographical sources, and links to other informational sites about each author. From the outset, in addition to contributions from professional and independent scholars, we have invited participation by students at our own institution, at other colleges and universities in the country, and at selected high schools in the greater metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul. The site has provided contributors with strict guidelines for what to include even as we have tried to be flexible about styles of presentation, given the eclectic populations from which our contributors are drawn.



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In addition to the significance of our web site as an expanding resource of information about American minority women writers, it also offers a fairly unique opportunity to participate in the discourse about Internet writing. To that end, we decided to undertake a small research project in which we would ask student contributors to tell us their own perceptions of how they may or may not have altered their writing styles and practices because they knew the product would be part of a website. This article reports our findings and draws tentative conclusions at its end. We hope others thinking about assigning on-line writing exercises or actively engaged in doing so will find our study useful, and we encourage responses so we may all grow more certain and at ease with this new medium which clearly is destined to figure prominently in our students' lives.

Because we have involved undergraduates at every stage of our web site project, we sought and were awarded a grant from the Center for Writing at the University of Minnesota to develop and administer a survey to twenty student contributors. Our survey asked the following questions, designed to elicit information about the experiences and attitudes of our students as they contemplated the on-line writing that disseminated their research for our site.

- * What motivated you to create a page for Voices from the Gaps?
- * How much experience have you had with generating content or pages for the World Wide Web?
- * Was your work always intended for posting on the web or did it evolve out of a separate project, such as a research paper or personal inquiry
- * If your work was not initially composed for the web, did you alter the content of your writing so that it would be more appropriate for posting on the web?
- * Did you consider ease of reading in composing the work for your page? Did you find yourself paying more attention to grammatical and compositional frameworks (i.e. , paragraphs) more or less than normal? Explain why or why not.
- * Did you consider your audience? Who did you think your audience would be, and how did this influence your work?
- * If you created this page in conjunction with a class or work with a professor or teacher, did they show you the website before you submitted your content? If yes, how did this influence your work?
- * When preparing your final work for submission on the web, did you visit the Voices from the Gaps web site to choose a model? Did you use any other models in preparing for final submission?
- * Did you consider visual aspects in your writing? How were you thinking of the visual presentation of your research on the web during your writing?
- * Did you find the process of writing for the web different from the process of writing an academic paper?
- * Feel free to tell us any additional details regarding your experience writing for Voices from the Gaps.



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Since the students in our survey were no longer enrolled in the classes or, in one case, in our college's Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, for which they completed their Voices author entries, on-line communication through e-mail became the medium we used to circulate the survey and collect responses. Our twenty student respondents had worked either individually or in small groups in a variety of courses focusing on women's studies and/or multicultural literature. In some courses, the author page had been one of several assignment options. In two offerings of a specially developed course centered on the Voices website itself, the class was divided into small groups whose work was entirely dedicated to the production of book reviews and author home pages for publication on the website.

Findings

Among the findings of interest generated by our survey was that none of the students had previous experience in producing on-line “academic” writing. One student had her own personal web page but had not been asked to write in a formally research-based context for the Internet previously. Several students saw the production of an on-line author entry as an attractive alternative to producing a conventional academic research paper. Since no expertise in the actual process of putting their work on-line was required (posting their entries was the role of our web site manager), students initially tended to select either the assignment or the Voices course not because they were “techies,” but primarily because they were interested in issues related to literature, women's studies, and/or research in those fields.

More specifically, students appeared to be powerfully motivated by the pragmatic outcome represented by the opportunity of having their writing and research become an official on-line publication, not only available to anyone with Internet access but personally attributed to each writer in an “about the contributors” section of the Voices website. This was apparently not only an inducement for high quality work; it was also a marker of difference some students noted between more conventional academic writing and writing for the web. Responding to the question concerning perceived differences between writing an academic paper and writing for the website, one student noted that she was “proud to be able to produce something that will be useful to others all over the world.” Another wrote that, particularly because of the functional outcome of the on-line project, the processes were,

“Definitely different. It was a rewarding experience. Being able to see our work produced and published on the web. It was much different than writing a paper and turning it in, never looking back at it. Now, we have the opportunity to tell our friends and family or co-workers about our experience and give them the location of the page to look at, all the time increasing the awareness of the web page and its benefits.”



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Drawing upon her own history as a student, another respondent noted that the difference between writing for on-line publication and for a conventional course assignment was related to a personal motivation. Describing the degree of that difference, she said, “Very much so - I felt as if I were writing for myself and everyone else who searches the web for easy to use references and guides, not writing an academic paper for a class.” This student writer articulated the usefulness of such a project for a collective of information seekers, among whom she included herself. Another student looked forward to an exponential usefulness extending beyond her work in the course: “Not only was this page going to appear on the web, as a college student with intentions of referencing my work, I wanted it to appeal to everyone, even potential employers. “ A benefit of this kind of on-line writerly production, therefore, appears to be students’ perceptions of its practical functionality: they are producing something concrete and useful. Although they may appreciate its usefulness differently, they can be proud of their written work to a degree not easily replicable in a paper produced for an individual teacher in a classroom setting. Additionally and importantly, there is the motivation of an on-line publication credit and acknowledgement as not only student but researcher.

Comments like these suggest the benefit of a greater investment in the writing process itself, having the potential to stimulate high quality performance by suggesting a more careful attention to the objective of writing well because of the public nature of the product. As one student noted, the “potentially much larger audience . . . made me more committed to producing good writing.” Many of the students in our survey noted that the assignment generated a conscious attempt to write well: “We wanted it to be an educational and professional page, not just junk on the web.”

In order to achieve that goal, almost every respondent indicated a heightened perception of audience and its role as a motivating factor in producing effective writing. Although their conceptions of audience differed, students consistently demonstrated uncommonly thoughtful considerations about whom they were writing for. One student, for example, said that, “My audience is me. It’s people like me who want/need to know something about an author.” Another wrote, “Normally in English courses, one writes a paper for one person, the teacher. But here we had to keep in mind a greater audience, making each sentence grammatically concise and clear.” “Without considering our audience,” another noted, “we would have been limiting the effectiveness of our work.” Several recognized their audience as “all age groups,” resulting in, as one expressed it, the “scrapping of an ultra-academic style for a style accessible to as many as possible.”



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This response is just one of several that demonstrated that not only were students focused on the idea of audience as a significant feature of their writing for the web, they were stimulated to take the next step connecting audience to issues such as voice and style. “We wrote for an audience composed of parents, teachers, children, and students. We had to balance this with an academic voice.” This seemed to us an important organic outcome related to the particular nature of our on-line project, one not so easy to engender in more conventional curricular settings. As writing teachers, we all have struggled to find ways to help students conceptualize audience as someone more than, distinguishable from, the teacher who will read the assignment. On-line writing involves less an imaginary audience than a virtual one - and since many students have counted themselves among that virtual audience on numerous occasions, the idea of audience not only becomes more concrete but has the potential to engender an increased accountability.

In fact, not only a fundamental attention to concerns about audience, but the level of sophistication students brought to solving the problem of access was one of the most striking strands of information our survey produced. This sophistication was demonstrated, we thought, by one respondent who framed her concern about audience around the responsibility she felt to her subject, since the information she created might determine whether those who used her “basic research,” as she put it, would go on to read that author’s work. Another student quite carefully distinguished between writing in certain sections in a way to reach one audience and writing other sections in another way for more sophisticated readers:

“I tried to make the biographical information understandable for all ages (from grade school up), but some of my critical sections deal with literary theory and criticism, and are intended for high school and college students. I wanted my biographical sections to be interesting and easy to understand, while I tried to expose the readers to different theorists and critics in the critical sections.”

Ultimately, writing for an on-line outcome appeared to help students conceptualize ideas about audience and then relate those ideas to decisions about readability in quite concrete and nuanced ways. Their reflections resulted in a sort of hyper-attentiveness which led to a significant degree of responsibility for producing an effective product.



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Survey questions relating to other aspects of what actually went into the creation of the author entries touched upon 1) the helpfulness of models, and 2) features of readability and formatting that may be particular to writing for the web and that also may be to some degree different from the conventions of “hard copy” writing. One component of accountability for the web pages students created resulted from their exposure to previously posted models already available on the Voices site. Students who were encouraged or required to view existing “templates” before they began their own projects reported the usefulness of these models in setting standards for their own approaches to their research and writing. Familiarity with the recommended organization and formatting of pages seemed to allow students more liberty to concentrate on issues of content: the accuracy and clarity of the presentation of biographical data and critical analysis and also of selected bibliography and on-line links. Representative of students’ perception of the helpfulness of models is this comment: “I had read several of the pages before writing my own. It totally influenced my own web production.” Another student wrote that familiarity with existing models “gave us the chance to connect with the content that was there and to get an idea of what had already worked and what would be important as a researcher to include.” In every case, students noted the usefulness of consulting models for their entries drawn from previous website postings.

Reviewing models before their own composing also helped students to be aware of some of the particular features that make on-line texts more readable. In part, models seemed to remind students of their own histories as consumers of internet information. Several spoke directly of the link between “ease of reading,” and visual components of on-line presentation. “We ended up dividing the paragraphs into even smaller sections because it makes it easier to read online,” one said. Another noted that “Long blocks of text aren’t very reader friendly.”

Students generally displayed a keen awareness that on-line writing involves particular issues related to the visual presentation of information. In addition to the book covers and photos of the writers that each author entry included, one person noted that visuals mostly depended upon “a paragraph length that was versatile, having short paragraphs along with longer ones.” Another concurred, noting that it was important to “help break up the information . . . Reading a computer screen can be straining on the eyes, especially if you have to work at a monitor for eight hours. When on-line, I believe people want information fast. Lists and short sentences and paragraphs are the best.” This student was disappointed, in fact, that her idea of creating an imaginary interview-with-the-author as a way of achieving these goals was rejected by her teacher because it didn’t conform to the established template for Voices pages. In fact, two students chafed against the pre-determined formatting of the Voices website, suggesting ideas for their entries’ visual presentation that they believed would make them more accessible.



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Again, this suggests an engagement with the work and its eventual effectiveness that is often difficult to engender when the outcome is a conventional academic paper which only the instructor will see. Summing up a conscious linking of all these issues as a function of the distinctive character of the public nature of writing for the web, one contributor concluded:

“I definitely framed the paper differently because it was for the web. I tried to make it easy to read and sorted out unnecessary information, where in papers you usually throw in extra pieces to make the paper longer, etc. ! We were really careful about errors and edited our information several times. We made the paragraphs short and to the point and carefully labeled the individual sections so someone who saw the web page could skip to the section they were most interested in.”

Conclusion

Anyone who has been a parent or a teacher knows all too well the force of peer pressure. Anyone who has written anything knows all too well the dire need for an audience in order to keep going. One constructive use of this knowledge can inform how we come to use on-line writing with our students. Allowing students to post their writing to a virtual audience made up, at least in part, of peers, and providing them the opportunity to assume the responsibility for quality that a “published” work demands, can motivate them to write more clearly and more engagingly. It also can prompt them to work hard to be both intelligible and persuasive. Anyone listening to incoming undergraduates or visiting high school classrooms also knows how accustomed more and more students are becoming to working with the internet. Combining these two truisms produces a tentative hypothesis about ways to improve college students’ writing and to make that writing have relevance outside itself and the classroom and professor for which it is produced.



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This study, though limited to a very small sample, indicates that there is plenty of room for serious consideration by writing teachers as well as teachers of literature historically ignored or underrepresented to ask students to write for the Internet. Students responding to our study survey attest to the fact that having a public if virtual “home” for their work, a place where it would be read by others similarly interested, encouraged them to think more directly about coherence, factual accuracy, and appeal to readers. While we recognize that various risks may be connected with such writing, we want to argue for the larger gains attached to writing for Internet publication. Such activity fosters an atmosphere in which writing takes on viable meaning for our students, moving from the sterile realm of “assignments” into some more congenial and energetic space inhabited by people for whom what they write is potentially useful and even important. Our study encourages us to continue working to find faculty at the high school and college/university levels willing to allow their very best students to work together or alone to produce author pages for our Voices from the Gaps website. It further encourages us to suggest to our colleagues interested in enhancing their own courses in literature or any other appropriate subject to design occasional writing assignments having as their final destination some site on the Internet.